



ISSUES IN BRIEF

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REPRESSION IN VIETNAM

Since the Communist takeover of Indochina in 1975, Vietnam has attracted relatively little notice in the American media. Recently, however, several new developments have once more focused attention on that troubled nation: the growing friction between the Hanoi regime and its Chinese and Cambodian neighbors; the unmasking of a Vietnamese spy operation in Washington; and the ongoing campaign for "normalization" of U. S.-Vietnamese relations and American financial aid to Hanoi.

Vietnam is a closed society, and it is difficult for international observers to monitor the status of human rights there. But the reports of those who have reached the West after living under the Hanoi government--sometimes confirmed by Hanoi itself or by Western journalists permitted to enter the country--indicate the following:

1) As many as 300,000 prisoners may still be held in "re-education" camps. The inmates range from political activists of all sorts, including many former Viet Cong, to those who are highly educated or have Western ties. Most are charged with no crime. Forced labor and malnutrition are the norm in the malaria-infested camps.

2) Prior to the Communist takeover, there were 27 daily newspapers in South Vietnam. Now there are three. The government owns all forms of communication. Even private ownership of typewriters is effectively banned. Most books and periodicals were burned shortly after the takeover.

3) Freedom of religion has also been extinguished. In protest of Hanoi's anti-religious policies, many Buddhist monks and nuns have burned themselves to death, though this grim fact has received comparatively little attention in the West.

4) More than a million people have been moved to the desolate rural "New Economic Zones" in emulation of the mass relocations that have taken place in Cambodia. Agricultural production has fallen dramatically, and the Vietnamese economy is a disaster area.

5) Though Hanoi does everything in its power to enforce its ban on emigration, 3,000 people a month still risk their lives to escape, many hundreds of them preferring to perish in the open sea than to continue living under Communism.¹

WESTERN REACTION

A notable Western reaction to revelations of this sort occurred in December, 1976, when about ninety former antiwar activists filed a protest with Hanoi's representative at the United Nations. Signers of the document included Joan Baez, Allen Ginsberg, ACLU head Aryeh Neier and New York City Council President Paul O'Dwyer.

The letter accused the Hanoi regime of "gross abuses" and "grievous and systematic violations of human rights." It said that the antiwar activists had been "deeply saddened to hear of the arrest and detention of a wide range of persons, including religious, cultural and political figures who opposed the Thieu government despite considerable political risks."

The protest demanded that Hanoi allow on-the-spot inspection of "re-education" (labor) camps, give an accounting of those held, and free those detained because of political beliefs. It also called for "recognition of the right to open and free communication."²

To be sure, not all members of the antiwar movement share these views. Some, led by Corliss Lamont, took an advertisement in the New York Times downplaying the severity of the repressive measures and pleading necessity.³ And other Westerners sympathetic to the Hanoi regime have spoken in enthusiastic tones of the practices of the new government. Midge Meinertz of Church World Service, for example, has stated that Vietnam is now a "free and independent society" which shows respect for "individual human dignity."⁴ A few Americans given tours of "re-education" camps and "New Economic Zones," such as Carol Bragg of the American Friends Service Committee, have concluded that Vietnam's rulers are going to "build a new society based on justice and equality."⁵

A markedly different picture emerges from the reports of refugees who have managed to escape the new Vietnam. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is Nguyen Cong Hoan. Hoan was a member of the National Assembly in Hanoi, and had previously been a leader of the "peace bloc" in the South Vietnamese legislature. Despite his favored position he eventually concluded that the new government was "the most inhuman and oppressive regime" Vietnam had ever known. With three other antiwar activists he escaped in a small boat, leaving his family behind, to call world attention to the "total suppression of human rights" by the Hanoi regime.⁶

Other refugees confirm what Hoan told a congressional committee in 1977:

In Vietnam today, it is the dictatorship of the Communist Party. The government can arrest, execute, deport, expropriate, tax, withdraw rice allowances, fire from employment, ban from schools, forbid traveling and do many more things

to the people without specific charges or explanation. . . All basic rights are suppressed. No one has the right to express any thought, idea, misgivings that are contrary to the official line. Whoever does will be considered "reactionary" and will be sent to "re-education camps."⁷

THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Postwar Vietnam's labor camps are noteworthy if only for the sheer number of prisoners held. "Never have we had such proof of so many detainees," writes Jean Lacouture, a French journalist who had been sympathetic to the Viet Cong. "[Not] in Moscow in 1917, nor in Madrid in 1939, nor in Paris or Rome in 1944, nor in Peking in 1949, nor in Havana in 1959, nor in Santiago in 1973."⁸ Lacouture estimates the number held at 300,000 or more, as does Father Andre Gelinas, a Jesuit priest who spent more than a year under Communist rule in the South.⁹ Hanoi itself admits to holding 50,000.¹⁰

According to Gelinas, former American officers' quarters have been converted into prisons, and as many as 26 prisoners are now held in the space once allotted to one American soldier. Two new jails have risen near Saigon. Most of the prisoners, however, are not held in urban jails but in rural "re-education" camps. Their number and location are kept secret, but refugees estimate that there are at least 60-90 camps, each with a minimum of 3-4,000 inmates.¹¹

The victims are by no means limited to supporters of the old government. Theodore Jacqueney of Worldview magazine names several dedicated opponents of the Thieu regime now reportedly dead or in prison. Among them: Senator Bui Thong Huan, second-ranking leader of the An Quang Buddhist bloc of anti-war senators; Deputy Tran Van Thuyen, chairman of the opposition bloc in Saigon's National Assembly; and Father Tran Huu Thanh, a radical preacher of "social gospel." Many dissidents imprisoned by Thieu, such as Deputy Tran Ngoc Chau, have been sent back to the same jails, with one difference: the Communists have bricked over the cell windows for greater security.¹²

As former deputy Hoan told a congressional committee:

Individuals and political parties once involved in the preservation of democratic liberties in South Vietnam, even those closely allied with the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government, are behind bars. . . Most will be kept indefinitely in "re-education camps" and many are deported to the North.¹³

Nor are the Viet Cong themselves immune. Gelinas speaks of the "systematic elimination" of the old Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), beginning in the summer of 1975. Their positions have been taken by Northerners.¹⁴

The total number imprisoned for "political" offenses is less than the number held for being too highly "educated" in some way or another.

This can mean, for example, knowing a foreign language or having the equivalent of a high school education. From 60 to 85 percent of the "educated" in Saigon have been sent to the camps, Gelinias estimates.¹⁵

Arrests usually take place late at night or at dawn. Rarely are there any specific charges. Sometimes the victim is summoned to a police station, or told to pack for a few weeks' trip. Attempts to escape are generally futile, as a thorough system of surveillance, internal passports and rice rationing enables the state to keep track of one's whereabouts.¹⁶

Inside the camps conditions are grim. To quote refugee Tran Van Son, the inmates' "unique concern is how to survive the camps."¹⁷ Death from malnutrition and malaria is common, refugees report, and the overcrowded, unsanitary conditions lead many to insanity. Talking to other inmates is forbidden in some camps; offenders are sent to the "dark rooms," dungeons where there is no light or ventilation and no sanitary facilities.¹⁸

One frequent way out of the camps is suicide. "Many people hanged themselves," according to a doctor interviewed by Jacqueney:

[One man] returned to Vietnam on the Thuong Tin ship, the one that came back from Guam when some refugees changed their minds. He hanged himself in his prison cell. His name was Lt. Tran Tin Viet. This time they let me try to treat him, and I gave him mouth-to-mouth and first aid. I asked them to let me send him to a hospital. They refused to permit it, although I think I could have saved him in a hospital. He needed oxygen to reanimate. Without it he died the next day.¹⁹

Nguyen Van Coi, an escapee from one of the camps, testified before Congress in June 1977. His description is a typical one. In Long Xuyen prison he was fed two small bowls of rice daily with a little salt. His cell measured 11' by 22'; it held 81 prisoners. He could not lie on his back while sleeping for lack of room. Two small air holes provided ventilation; there were no windows, and the door was kept closed. Occasionally, for as little as fifteen minutes a week, the prisoners emerged from the dark cell into blinding sunlight. The toilet in the cell gave off a hideous stench, and was clogged with fly larvae which could not be kept out of the ears and mouth at night.

Coi said he was later transferred to two camps even worse than Long Xuyen. In the mosquito-infested U-Minh forest, no actual camp had been set up, and prisoners were chained to tree trunks. Coi's original clothing was gone by this time, and he used strips of eucalyptus bark instead. From about dawn to dusk without a break he cleared the woods.²⁰

Another form of labor common in the camps, refugees report, is mine-field sweeping. Unskilled civilians--often those prisoners who have proved troublesome to their captors--must go into the mine-fields to locate and defuse the weapons.²¹

Such macabre tasks are carried out under the slogan "labor is glory." As the official Saigon Giai Phong newspaper puts it, labor has the "power of cleansing these stains from them and transforming them into clean persons."²²

Any time left over from labor is usually devoted to "re-education." Part of this is the confession, or "self-criticism": the prisoner must list all his past misdeeds and improper attitudes. Inmates must write such confessions often, up to several times daily, and omitting a detail included in an earlier version leaves one open to severe reprimand or worse.

The balance of the "re-education" process consists of minute study of propaganda textbooks. Each paragraph is studied for days at a time.²³

GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF OPINION

Although this "re-education" is supposed to be the justification for the camps, it differs little from the propaganda effort in the country at large. Everyone is expected to attend political meetings, sometimes daily. The agenda includes informing on one's neighbors, as well as listening to official propaganda.²⁴

The authorities are making strenuous efforts to gain control of public opinion. Before the Communist takeover, there were 27 daily newspapers in four languages. Now there are three. Before, there were three television and two dozen radio stations. Now there is one TV station, which broadcasts for two hours each morning, and three radio stations. Both newspapers and broadcast media are run by the government, and are little more than propaganda outlets. All back issues of the old newspapers have been burned. It is illegal to listen to foreign radio, or to fail to inform on those who do.²⁵

Soon after the takeover the Communists ordered most books on controversial topics burned--and most topics were controversial. Huge bonfires of proscribed books lit the streets of Saigon. Each family must now submit to the state a list of the books it owns. Private ownership of typewriters has been effectively outlawed as well.²⁶

Religion is persecuted. There are 200-300 priests and six bishops in jail. Treatment of Buddhists is still harsher, as they have little recourse to world opinion. But Christianity is under fire too. By the end of the "five year plan," in 1982, it is scheduled not to exist. Teaching religion to children is prohibited.²⁷

A number of Western religious groups have claimed that the Hanoi regime tolerates religion.²⁸ James Klassen of the Mennonite Central Committee, for example, does "not feel that there was any systematic repression of religion by the government." He bases this view largely on the experience of his own congregation, which cooperated enthusiastically with the government and was allowed to continue meeting. Still, Klassen admits that distribution of religious tracts

is now illegal, that all church meetings must be registered with the state, and that the government propagandizes against religion.²⁹

Coi reports that most of the "churches" shown Western visitors are now used exclusively for political meetings. Bach Mai was Hanoi's only remaining church when it was converted into a hospital; worshippers must now meet in an alley.³⁰

The most striking reaction to persecution of religion in Vietnam has gone almost unnoticed in the West. Many Buddhist monks and nuns have burned themselves to death in protest, including twelve members of the An Quang sect at Can Tho in November 1975.³¹ The self-immolation of Buddhist monks in the early sixties helped turn world opinion against the Diem government. But the recent suicides, dramatic as they are, have been virtually ignored by world opinion.

One of the most effective methods of controlling the public was the "census" of 1976. As Gelinias describes it:

The form which you had to fill out consisted of seven or eight pages in which you were absolutely required to describe your monthly activities during the last seven years, where you lived, what you did, what you thought, and why you thought it, the names of people you know and of those for whom you worked, your political opinions, etc. On each form you had to list the names of five people who could guarantee the accuracy of your statements.

But this form was merely a preliminary draft. You had to read it publicly before the assembled members of your Tô (neighborhood council), and if your neighbors thought there were errors or omissions they could correct them. The chief of the Tô would then approve or reject your census form and only then could you make a clean final copy; but you had to do this before a kind of jury of four or five civil servants. That could take four or five hours, after which you turned in your form, but without being able to keep any notes.

And there is the catch. Because ten days later you have to answer the same questions without crossing yourself up; and then the questions must be answered yet a third time, after the authorities had checked over all the rest of your family. "Your sister-in-law was a secretary for a French company and you didn't say so. Why? And the six months you spent in the army. Have you forgotten them?" And your brother-in-law, uncle and aunt go through the same paces. So by collating all such information, by working through millions of forms, the authorities are able to know everything about everybody.³²

Every aspect of life is subject to state control. Choice of occupation, choice of residence, choice even of what clothing to wear, all have disappeared. "Western" habits are being extirpated. Soldiers occasionally board public buses and clip women's nails if they seem too long, according to Gelinias.³³

"NEW ECONOMIC ZONES"

The major fear of Saigon residents is neither the rigors of city life nor the labor camps, but the "new economic zones." These are duplicating, on a smaller scale, the experiments of neighboring Cambodia in forced relocation.

Ostensibly the "New Economic Zones" are pleasant rural areas being developed by teams of urban workers. The reality, according to most refugees, is one of famine, epidemics, wretched living conditions and complete servitude. Often virtually no constructive work is accomplished.³⁴

Some 3,000 persons a day leave Saigon for the zones. In 1976, when more than a million had been relocated, officials predicted that another eight million would eventually be moved to the zones.³⁵

Many in the South are simply ordered out of the cities where they have spent their lives; others are persuaded to go by means of coercion so strong as to be almost worse than explicit dictates. Sometimes wrecking crews have been sent to demolish the homes of those who delayed in "agreeing" to leave.³⁶ Other recalcitrants are deprived of food rations.³⁷

The positions of those sent to the zones or camps are often taken by Northerners. As Tiziano Terzani puts it in the New York Review of Books: "Many thousands of people from the North (some estimates put the figure as high as half a million) have been imported to take over the responsibilities for administering many aspects of life throughout the South."³⁸

ECONOMIC WOES

With the South's leading cities being depopulated, it is little wonder that the economy is staggering badly. Factories and hospital equipment have been removed in quantity and taken to the North.³⁹ Gelinis reports: "There is no famine: but many live in misery. The two staple foods are rice and the Chinese potato, the khoai-mi, which is normally eaten by animals but is now mixed with rice to make it go further. . . dogs and cats disappeared long ago; if one didn't eat them, they would be stolen."⁴⁰

Fish has become scarce; the state has virtually banned ocean fishing to discourage escape by sea.⁴¹ The produce of mango farmers has been taxed so heavily that they have cut down the trees for firewood. Production of rice, the most vital foodstuff of all, is suffering for similar reasons.⁴² The price of milk has increased sixfold since the takeover.⁴³

Property rights have received the sort of treatment typical of communist regimes. Thousands of suicides followed a 1975 proclamation confiscating all but the smallest holdings of wealth, says Gelinis.⁴⁴ Ironically for those who saw "corruption" as one vice from which the Communists would at least be free, Vietnam has gone on what the Washington Post calls a "corruption binge." Hanoi

itself complains that such offenses as bribery and embezzlement "are increasing in both frequency and seriousness," and says corrupt officials have been imprisoning those who refuse to pay bribes. A medium-sized family can reportedly buy the right to "emigrate" in a small boat from a Vietnamese port by paying \$6,000 in gold to a "syndicate" of bureaucrats.⁴⁵

Hanoi has not demobilized its army, one of the largest in the world. But it is an army which provides little protection to its own subjects. Cambodian army units periodically strike across the border to massacre Vietnamese civilians, committing such atrocities as dismemberment and mutilation of women and children. According to Terzani in the Washington Post, the Vietnamese government has tried to ignore these attacks in order to avoid a quarrel with Cambodia's Chinese ally.⁴⁶ Before the worsening of relations between the two governments in April 1976, incidentally, Vietnamese authorities forcibly repatriated thousands of Cambodians who had fled that country's repressive regime. All, the Post reports, were promptly killed by Phnom Penh's rulers.⁴⁷

If any good can be said to come out of an experience like Vietnam's, perhaps it will take the form of a more realistic American view of the consequences of Communist takeovers. As Rev. Richard Neuhaus of Clergy and Laity Concerned, one of the antiwar activists who signed the protest of December '76, said: "We wanted to believe desperately--so desperately--the pledge and the promises of respect that would be shown [by the Communists] toward human beings and human rights."⁴⁸ That belief has been rudely shattered by the grim experience of Vietnam.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Washington Post, April 30, 1978.
2. Washington Post, December 30, 1976.
3. New York Times, January 30, 1977.
4. Quoted in Human Events, April 8, 1978.
5. Carol Bragg, "Vietnam Two Years Later," American Friends Service Committee, April 1977.
6. New York Times, May 18, 1977. See also Nguyen Cong Hoan, Hearings before the International Organizations Subcommittee, House International Relations Committee, July 26, 1977, and Human Events, August 6, 1977.
7. Hearings before the International Organizations Subcommittee, p. 146.
8. Quoted in Theodore Jacqueney, "They are us, were we Vietnamese," Worldview, April 1977.
9. Fr. Andre Gelinias, New York Review of Books, March 17, 1977.
10. Jacqueney, loc. cit.
11. Fr. Andre Gelinias, Hearings before the International Operations Subcommittee, House International Relations Committee, p. 22.

12. Jacqueney, op. cit.
13. Hoan, Hearings, p. 147.
14. Gelinas, New York Review of Books.
15. Gelinas, Hearings, p. 22.
16. Ibid.
17. Washington Post, April 30, 1978.
18. Ibid. See also Nguyen Van Coi, Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, House International Relations Committee, June 21, 1977.
19. Jacqueney, op. cit.
20. Coi, Hearings, pp. 74-75.
21. Jacqueney, op. cit.
22. Washington Post, April 30, 1978.
23. Gelinas, New York Review of Books. See also New York Times, May 18, 1977.
24. Gelinas, New York Review of Books.
25. Ibid. and Gelinas, Hearings, p. 8.
26. Ibid.
27. Nguyen Cong Hoan, "The Current Situation of Religions in Vietnam," May 22, 1977. See also Hearings, pp. 103 and 151.
28. See, for example, Bragg, op. cit.
29. James Klassen, "Religion in Vietnam Today," available from American Friends Service Committee.
30. Coi, Hearings, p. 137.
31. Jacqueney, op. cit. See also Hoan, "The Current Situation of Religions in Vietnam."
32. Gelinas, New York Review of Books.
33. Ibid. See also New York Times, May 18, 1977.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Washington Post, April 30, 1978.
38. New York Review of Books, June 15, 1976.
39. Gelinas, New York Review of Books.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid. See also Vietnam News, November-December 1977, newsletter of the American Vietnamese Association.
42. Ibid.
43. Terzani, New York Review of Books.
44. Gelinas, New York Review of Books.
45. Washington Post, December 25, 1977 and July 16, 1977.
46. Washington Post, April 29, 1978.
47. Ibid.
48. Washington Post, December 30, 1978.